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Apps for kids are a quick hit Family business starts to look lucrative as software sells

BY KEVIN WALTERS • THE TENNESSEAN • SEPTEMBER 21, 2010

The five little monkeys, friendly cows and happy pigs now helping thousands of children learn to read on iPhones and iPads got their start in a home in the Forrest Crossing subdivision.

It's here that husband-and-wife team John Watts and Wendy Loesch Watts spent nights and weekends designing four software applications — commonly known as "apps" — for children.

First launched in April, the four Loeschware apps have been highly ranked and at the current pace are projected to be purchased by download 100,000 times annually through Apple computer's online iTunes store.



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Wendy Loesch Watts sits with her twin daughters, Ava and Ella, as they play with an educational app that she designed with her husband, John. (Shelley Mays / The Tennessean)

Before you ask, no, they're not software gurus. And, no, they're not millionaires — at least not yet. Led by Wendy's brother Ryan Loesch, who lives in Atlanta, the family of entrepreneurs has made back its initial investment of a few thousand dollars and is positioned to be part of the burgeoning wave of app designers.

At the flick of a child's finger, the colorful, interactive apps give toddlers and young children a tool for learning.

Making those apps easy enough for kids to use was anything but child's play.

"There was a lot of sweat and blood," said Wendy, 36 and a mother of twins. "We didn't know what we were doing. We don't have animation experience. We kind of felt our way through it."

Marketplace is growing

That they've connected with parents and kids in the populous world of apps is no small feat.

Consider: There have been more than 6.5 billion downloads of apps and more than 250,000 apps — for sale and free — said Ted Miller, a spokesman for Cupertino, Calif.-based Apple.

Loeschware apps are for sale.

And the potential number grows as more than 230,000 people activate their new iPads and iPhones every day, according to Miller's figures.

Getting into the market by creating an app that parents would seek out and kids would adopt was the idea of Wendy's brother Ryan Loesch, who has a software/IT background and works for a large Southeastern bank based in Atlanta.

The intuitive technology of the iPhone and ease that children can learn how to use it was the germ of the idea.

"A lot of what drove it for me was watching my children interact (with the iPhone)," Loesch said. "The kids were 18 months old. ... It just got some ideas churning."

Loesch created a plan: He'd set up the financing using \$3,500 to \$4,000 on credit cards, hire a team of Chinese programmers working outside Shanghai to handle much of the programming and ask his sister and brother-in-law to do the art. Ryan's wife, Emma handles the accounting and the finances.

Project required lots of drawings, files

John, who is an instructor at O'More College of Design, handled the art chores, illustrating the cows and pigs and other animals.

A sculptor by training, he had never tackled anything quite like the Old MacDonald's Farm app.

"I had no idea what all it would take to do this," he said. "When you go back and look at one of the apps and you take it apart and look at all the files that it takes, it can get into the thousands (of drawings). I never realized it was so labor-intensive. You just keep plugging away at it."

The launch of the first apps, back in 2009, coincided with the rise of "apps" everywhere, which has led to some misconceptions that creating an app is easy.

"Everyone has an idea, but turning it into something tangible is a different story," Wendy said.

Though their apps are popular, none of the four principals is retiring just yet — though Loesch said he was able to get a return on their investment on the Old MacDonald's Farm app in just 11 days. They get a check from Apple with their money.

Loesch wants to grow their number of apps and hopes to expand into the Android phone market.